

TRAVEL

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HAVE CAUSE WILL TRAVEL

A new travel fad that combines exploring exotic locales and volunteering for a cause sounds like the perfect way to travel. Is this a win-win situation or is it just another trend that's too good to be true?

Did you know that one transatlantic flight for a family of four produces more carbon dioxide than that same family normally generates in an entire year? That's not to say that short flights are any better. In fact, they're comparatively worse, considering how much energy a plane requires just to take-off and land.

The implications are discouraging: You can be the best eco-trooper there is – recycling whenever possible, reducing your trash to a minimum, switching off electrical appliances at the power point – but the minute you step on a plane for a well-deserved holiday, all the brownie points you've accumulated for the year would be wiped out. Unless you're planning on swimming home, you're also looking at good behaviour for at least two years before you can even think of a holiday destination that requires you to fly.

This bit of information puts me in a despondent mood. I do my best to reduce my carbon footprint and wave the "Save Gaia" placard whenever I can (to the point that I've become a running joke at the office)... but to have to give up travelling? Surely, there must be a better way? Faced with the possibility of never travelling with a clear conscience again, I scoured the Internet for solutions as if my sanity depended on it.

From tips on how to make your trip more eco-friendly (fly direct whenever possible, even though a change of flight and transit may save you money), to airlines that only use energy and fuel-efficient planes (Virgin Atlantic completed the world's first flight using a 20 per cent bio fuel-powered Boeing 747-400 from Heathrow to Amsterdam), I discovered a community of like-minded people who were equally concerned about the environmental impact of their travels.

Even more heartening was the startling discovery of how much the market for voluntourism has grown. It was inspiring to find images and accounts of everyday people teaching in Cambodia, rebuilding houses in Indonesia, collecting data on whales in Australia and rehabilitating cheetahs in South Africa. The words "priceless experience", "fulfilling journey" and "only way to travel" kept reappearing like a propagandist mantra that would do any credit card company proud.

It was a classic *Aladdin* moment for me with a whole new world opening before my eyes. Yet, as excited as I was with a somewhat healthy altruistic market, my

sceptic side kicked in with questions of just how beneficial these voluntourism organisations were in reality. Do they actually do good or are they just another feel-good excuse for self-indulgence?

Volunteer Tourist

As its name suggests, voluntourism combines aspects of tourism and volunteerism, presenting itself as a win-win situation for both the traveller and the community being visited. And the concept is ingeniously beautiful in theory. After all, what could be more ideal than to contribute back to the community that you are benefiting from?

“Travel expands the mind; voluntary service expands the heart,” says David Clemmons, founder of VolunTourism.org, a website for individual travellers and non-profit organisations interested in getting involved. “Voluntourism integrates the best of travel and tourism – arts, culture, geography, heritage sites, the natural environment and recreation – with the opportunity to serve and enhance the destination; its people, places and things. It gives you a chance to experience a destination as a home instead of just another place to go.”

What Clemmons’ words leave to the imagination, media images burn into the mind’s eye: Audrey Hepburn with a Somalian child in her arms, Julia Roberts in Borneo with an orang-utan in hers, George Clooney walking in the war-stricken region of Dafur, Sudan. We’ve all seen the photographs of Hollywood stars lending their services and stardom to causes across the globe. Sure, many cynics have doubted the sincerity of these high-profiled intentions. But while they mutter from the comforts of their couch, celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Leonardo DiCaprio continue using their fame as an influential tool to open doors that the average Joe just can’t.

Therein lies the crux of the matter: From humanitarian and wildlife causes, to marine and environmental enterprises, these unadulterated “priceless” experiences are no longer exclusive to just dedicated activists or well-meaning superstars. With a few clicks of the button, almost anyone with time and money on their hands can embark on this life-altering journey.

Back To Basic

“Travellers are looking for a sense of purpose in their leisure activities,” says Brian Mullis, president of the Sustainable Travel International, a non-profit organisation dedicated to environmental conservation and cultural heritage protection. “They are looking at new ways of distributing wealth. The age of check-book philanthropy is morphing into the age of participatory philanthropy.” If Mullis’ perception is accurate, then travel trends have definitely made a 180-degree turnabout.

Since the dawn of the jet-set era in the ’50s, glamour and prestige have been an integral part of the travel mix. The accumulation of wealth by the world’s affluent only served to push the boundaries of what “luxury” means to surrealistic extremes.

Seven-starred hotels, breakfasts of champagne and beluga caviar and spa packages inclusive of diamond-infused products. Somewhere along the line, a word that originally denoted shameful excess turned into an enviable adjective. “Luxury” came to mean the enjoyment of the ultimate experience regardless of its price.

A newfound surge in voluntourism options shows a reversal of that trend. It signals a growing community who is increasingly uncomfortable with traversing the globe for pure indulgence. Instead, they’re seeking experiences that do more than scratch the glossy surface with meaningful interactions that give as much as it takes – be it teaching orphans in an impoverished village or trekking through the Amazon to study climate change. It seems being a globetrotter without a cause gets you as much respect these days as a five-year-old kid who missed his afternoon nap.

Reality Check

Considering the vast range of voluntourism expeditions now available in the market, the question I found myself asking is not why, but why not?

As Susan J Ellis, President of volunteerism specialists Energize, Inc. notes, a traveller can use vacation time to great advantage when a voluntour is “well-organised and thoughtfully planned”.

It serves a dual purpose for time-strapped individuals. Families come away with shared memories of fulfilling experiences. Singles are able to share and interact with a group of like-minded people. Cultural exchanges provide intimate insights of another world, resulting in a greater understanding and tolerance for human differences. The world could use a lot more of that.

Surts of well-managed volunteer help are also highly-productive for projects that require a fresh flow of manpower. “After a natural disaster, for example, the enormous clean-up and rebuilding work goes on for years, and a continuous stream of fresh recruits can keep the momentum going,” Ellis says.

But similarly with Ellis, Clemmons also stresses the need for proper guidance and what he terms as “technical support”. In other words: Well-equipped, experienced voluntourism organisers who are focused on making it a successful expedition for all involved. The alternative can cause more harm than good.

This is perhaps the greatest setback that the nascent industry faces today. The lack of a governing body to regulate makes it easy for profit-making organisations to simply cash in by slapping the “voluntourism” sticker onto their corporate bumper.

The lack of hard and fast rules or guidelines also leaves too much to interpretation. This can act to protect opportunist companies – and, to a certain extent, travellers – at the expense of the host community. As Ellis explains, “the biggest gripe about volunteer vacations is that they simply expand the trend of episodic volunteering, in which feel-good bursts of service give the volunteer

pleasure but do not result in much useful help for the recipients or the complex cause.”

She’s got a point. How are the expeditions chosen and are voluntourists truly able to contribute in their short vacation span? Will orientation and training be provided and is there a screening process for voluntourists? What’s the ratio of volunteerism to tourism and how do you ensure the optimal balance? Is there someone on site to troubleshoot problems that may arise? These are some of the issues that need to be tackled before sending across your credit card details with a pat on the back.

Happy Trails

Not that this should stop you from packing for a worthy journey. With a little bit of research and a willingness to correspond with the organiser, these questions can be easily answered. In many cases, expedition organisers (the experienced ones, at least) will have all the information you need on their website.

Earthwatch Institute (www.earthwatch.org) is a good example of this. A non-profit organisation dedicated to wildlife and environmental conservation projects, Earthwatch provides scientific research teams around the world with volunteers to collect field data. It also provides volunteers with the opportunity to get involved in environments that aren’t easily accessible under normal circumstances. Fancy a week in the Kenyan savannah monitoring elephants? How about a trek across the snow-packed ground of the Arctic studying the effects of climate change?

Earthwatch recruits close to 4,000 volunteers a year – a feat that is much helped by its comprehensive and user-friendly website. Providing clear information on the organisation, including its objectives and expeditions, the website also offers an easy step-by-step sign up process that comes complete with an information pack (customised to each expedition) to prepare you for your adventure.

And what an adventure it can be. With a healthy attitude, dash of caution and slice of proactivism, voluntourism can deliver all it promises. “Life-altering journey?” I hope so. “Once-in-a-lifetime experience?” Definitely not. I just found my new mode of travel.